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THE JOURNAL OF INDIAN ART AND INDUSTRY

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Vol. X.

OCTOBER, 1903] [No. 84.

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BY HARRY L. TILLY.

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INDEX TO VOLUME VIII.

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Published under the patronage of the Government of India.

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W. GRIGGS,
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The Journal of Indian Art and Industry.

THE SILVERWORK OF BURMA.

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By HARRY L. TILLY, Esq.

There are perhaps few countries in the world in which the use of gold and silver is prohibited in ceremonial worship, and fewer still in which there is no religious service conducted by priests. Yet such is the case in Burma where the monks who follow the strict precepts of their Lord Gaudama are forbidden to touch gold or silver, and beyond expounding the law of their great teacher, do not preside over any religious exercises nor do they assist at a marriage or perform any last offices over the remains of the being who has quitted this scene of trial. The silversmiths of Burma, therefore, have never been called on to make praying-wheels or censers or incense-burners as in some other Buddhist countries, nor has their art developed by the experience of generations in the design and execution of chalices, crucifixes, croziers, of reliquaries and shrines, as in Christian countries. And until the last fifty years or so their field of work was still further limited by sumptuary laws which, wherever the authority of the Burmese Government was sufficiently powerful, denied to any but those of royal blood the use of gold or silver vessels. As a set-off to these limitations there was the patronage of the King and the Court, and much gold plate was made both for the personal use of the monarch and for gifts to be presented on special occasions. Silver bowls, betel boxes and drinking cups were in common use in the palace and no doubt were also used by powerful and wealthy people who were for one reason or another able to evade or over-ride the sumptuary regulations.

With the gradual extension of the rule of the British, has followed freedom from restriction and greater security of property, while display no longer exposes the imprudent to the exactions of their rulers, and consequently well-to-do Burmans are generally the possessors of two or three silver bowls and drinking cups, and it is not uncommon to find minute silver bowls in the trays of the betel boxes of quite poor people. The Burmese are, however, still simple in their tastes, and much plate is not found in any village or small town; but what there is may always be borrowed for a festival, such as the assumption of the yellow robe by a son or the boring of the ears of a daughter. On these occasions all the neighbours are invited and contribute towards the feast, either in money or in kind.

The ceremony of taking the yellow robe by a Buddhist corresponds to confirmation in a Christian church, and in each case the vows to live a pure life are taken at about the same age. To the Burman boy each of the prescribed acts on that day is significant and reminds him of the great renunciation of Gaudama Buddha. He is dressed as a prince and is led forth through the streets of his native place sheltered by royal umbrellas and accompanied by shouting companions, and when he returns to his old home he finds it transformed, as far as the means of his people will allow, into a palace filled with fair young girls dressed in the gayest silks, laughing and joking beneath bright canopies edged with white cloth cut into fairy-like lace. There is much feasting and the food itself is out of the ordinary, while even water and betel-nut are served in silver. All this is in honour of the boy, but he looks beyond to the end of the room where, on a raised dais, behind large fans, sit the monks in their yellow robes, and he hastens to prostrate himself, remembering that he must give up all these things even as did the Lord Gaudama. He takes the vows of poverty and austerity, his head is shaved and his clothes are thrown aside and exchanged for a mendicant's garments, and he humbly follows his teacher to the quiet monastery, to stay there for the rest of his life, or for a couple of months, according to his vocation. And so with all the festivals of the Burmese,—gay colours, white jackets, a little silverware, laughing girls, young men full of the pride of life, the old looking on with tolerant eyes, and in the background the monastery calling to mind the weighment of merit against demerit in the working out of the inexorable law of existence.

It is not surprising then that the Burmese silversmith has little variety of shape to show his European customers, and does not succeed particularly well in making teapots, race cups and other things, which he and his have never used. But on the squat forms of bowl or betel box his fancy depicts the immortal stories of the past—stories many of them taken from the ancient treasure-house of India; such as the Ramayana, which to the Burman recounts the adventures of Gaudama in one of his previous existences. There are ten such principal legends, and to each of the characters is assigned by tradition a precise costume and particular ornaments; nay more, the very attitudes are in many instances prescribed, and of the many demons, ogres and guardian spirits who continually appear throughout the stories to thwart or aid the hero, each one may at once be recognized by its action or emblem. Besides bowls, drinking cups and betel boxes (the latter being in shape like a biscuit box), the

Burman silversmiths make small oval or octagonal boxes to hold the lime which is eaten with betel-nut; the cover fits very tightly and usually has a projecting smooth edge or beading by which it is removed. These little boxes are sometimes made of gold or in niello work, as well as in silver, and are generally well designed and finely executed. They are placed in the tray of the betel box with four or more small cups or bowls having a wreath or border of flower-work near the upper edge, and in them are placed the condiments taken with the areca nut; the betel-vine leaves are placed in a double air-tight tray below the upper tray, and in the space at the bottom are placed tobacco leaves. The equipment is rendered complete by a pair of curiously curved shears, often inlaid with gold or silver damascene work. In the palace the whole box was carried on a stand and was made of gold, as indeed were the spittoons, *tazza* in elaborately carved repoussé work with pierced covers, the sword of state and any other object for the personal use of the monarch. Many silversmiths embellish these larger pieces with small fantastic statuettes made by the *cire perdue* process, which, although lost for some generations in Europe, appears to have been generally known throughout India and Thibet.

Silver.—Under the Burmese Government the buying and selling of silver might only be conducted under the supervision of a licensed broker, and each piece was named and marked in accordance with a regular scale: for example, rupee silver was said to be a mixture of—Pure silver 10 ticals, copper ½ tical, lead ½ tical; total 11 ticals; while the China dollar was thought to correspond to a mixture of—Pure silver 10 ticals, copper 1 tical, lead 1 tical; total 12 ticals; and so on, through many variations. The best silver from the mines was of a standard known as *Ngwe zin baw pyu*, and when to this was added ½ per cent of copper and ½ per cent of lead it was called *Ywet ni*. This variety can now be obtained in the market and is used to improve the quality of silver handed to the silversmith. Silver is purified of zinc and copper by melting it in a crucible and adding a small quantity of lead, on which the greater part of the alloys is given off in gas. The addition of lead is repeated if necessary. In our days, English bar silver is used by the silversmiths of large towns, but in the district rupees are still melted down, especially for small work.

Method of Working.—The method of the Burmese silversmith can best be explained by describing the making of a bowl. The silver is melted in a flat clay saucer over a flaming fire and, when purified, is allowed to cool in the saucer, which serves as the mould to produce a plate, flat on one side and convex on the other, about ½ inch to ¾ inch thick. The silver plate is then gradually beaten out on a round iron anvil with an iron hammer until it is of the full diameter of the bowl to be produced. Throughout this process, and until all hammering is over, it is from time to time heated to red heat and dipped in cold water to preserve its ductility. The right diameter being attained, an edge or lip is raised by hammering with a straight-edged hammer at an angle of 45°, and when the lip has been raised right round, the operator begins beating on the bottom in a narrowing spiral line until the centre is reached, when he steadily works outwards and again inwards, and so on. This process causes the lip or edge to rise, and it is continued until the full height required has been obtained. The bowl is then beaten with a small hammer on a small curved iron anvil until it is of the right shape, when it appears fairly smooth and covered with innumerable small hammer marks. A composition of earth oil 2 parts, brickdust 2 parts, and resin 4 parts is now prepared and melted into the small bowls, and a short stick is thrust in to serve as a handle. In large bowls an earthenware jar, tapering towards the bottom, is placed about halfway down the bowl and the space between the two filled up with the composition.

The lines dividing the surface horizontally are drawn on by compass and then with a graver. The surface is divided into the various "houses" or portions for figures, and the borders and the flower-work drawn with a pencil and marked out with a graver. The master generally draws a small portion as a pattern, which is repeated by his pupils; he should also draw the figures in pencil, unless he has a skilled pupil. When the entire pattern has been engraved in line, the first embossing takes place, by which all the parts to be lowered are punched in and recede into the pliant composition, which also forces out those portions which are to be in relief. When this is done the composition is melted out, and those portions which are not yet in high or sharp enough relief are punched outwards from inside until the whole is satisfactory, which generally means that this process has to be repeated two or three times, the silver being annealed each time. In inferior work but one firing is given and the resultant work is very coarse and blunt. When, however, the bowl is ready for the finishing work, it is again filled with the waxlike composition and the edges of the embossed portions are defined, and it is handed over to be chased, carved and cut about until every face has expression, all clothes texture, until the leaves curl over round the gracefully twining tendrils, and the whole composition receives those last touches which show to all the design that has from the beginning been clear in the creative brain of the artist.

When the work is finished it is heated in the fire and then boiled in a solution of alum for half an hour, and washed and then brushed with soapnuts and cold water. The flower-work is burnished with small brass-wire

brushes and the large smooth portions with steel burnishers, and if the purchaser requires a glittering mass the whole is rubbed with white enamel beads; but this process, besides rendering everything indistinct, takes off the sharp edges and destroys the best part of the work.

In many compositions, such as centre-pieces, vases and candlesticks, figures in the round are introduced. The figure is first shaped and carved in a composition made of—Beeswax 2 parts, resin 1 part. When correctly modelled, the wax figure is coated over with a thin layer of fine clay, well-kneaded and mixed with dried powdered horse dung and afterwards with a thicker layer of river silt. The mould is baked in the fire, the wax melts and runs out through a hole left for the purpose, and the clay becomes as hard as a brick. The melted silver is run in while the mould is red hot, and when cool the mould is broken, and the silver figure is chased and carved until complete.

Tools and Plant.—Among the tools and plant of a worker in silver is an open charcoal hearth fanned by English or Burmese bellows. The latter deserves a word or two of description, as they are used in many trades. They are of all sizes, from the tiny model of the goldsmith, which may be worked with the little finger, to the huge apparatus of the brass-founder, requiring a man to each rod. The bellows are formed by placing vertically, side by side, two hollow bamboos plugged at the bottom. From just above the plug two small bamboo pipes converge to the hearth, where they are connected by a fireclay nozzle. The blast is formed by compressing the air in the tubes by an ingenious contrivance, which serves at the same time as a piston and as a valve for admitting air. Each tube or cylinder is fitted with a rod, at the end of which is tied a bunch of cock's feathers with the quills upwards; when the rod is forced down, the feathers are pressed against the side of the cylinder by resistance of the air and an air-tight piston is obtained; when the rod is drawn up again, the feathers trail downwards and the cylinder is filled with air. The rods are worked alternately, and in all (except the largest blowers) are connected at the top by a bar pivotted at a point between them, so that a reciprocating movement can be given by pushing up and pulling down one end of the cross-rod by means of a light bamboo. The combined piston and valve closely resemble the feather brushes used for dusting pictures. The other tools used by silversmiths are crucibles, hammers, small anvils, blowpipe, spirit lamp, many sizes of punches and small chisels, a small tapping hammer and round steel burnishers. Some men are able to use the lathe.

Profits.—The best master-silversmiths are able to make a profit of about 30 per cent on the ultimate value of the work turned out of their shop, provided that there is enough work to keep all hands busily engaged. This is not, however, often the case, and the trade is not a paying one. The leading artists are devoted to their art and are quite content if they can gain enough to live on, provided they keep their position at the head of the craft. Workmanship is paid for by weight and can be obtained at from eight annas to one rupee eight annas per rupee weight; the worst work is dear at eight annas, but the best or master-silversmith's work is decidedly cheap at one rupee eight annas, and the artist will not give it willingly on pieces weighing less than one hundred tolas. A small bowl made entirely by a good master-silversmith is practically sold according to its artistic value and not by weight.

Niello Work.—Many of the silversmiths of Burma are proficient in this art, though few are fond of it, because it entails working over a hot furnace and in sulphurous fumes. The design appears as if drawn in silver outline on a black ground. The articles made are cups, lime boxes, plates and knife handles, and are quite smooth with a good polish. The black enamel used is made of—Lead 2 parts, silver 1 part, copper 1 part; the materials are melted in a fierce fire and sulphur added at discretion. The object to be treated is made in silver about one-third of an inch thick, and the design is drawn and engraved as before. The lines of the drawing are left alone, but all other parts are punched in and the edges cut sharp with a small chisel. The *niello*, prepared as above, is finely powdered, mixed with borax and placed in all the hollows. The work is then placed under an iron cage in a fierce charcoal fire, where it is fused. It is then filed smooth, polished with sand-paper, then with charcoal-dust, and finally burnished like silver-work.

Silversmiths also occasionally do a little damascening, either of silver or gold on blackened copper or silver and brass on iron. The copper is blackened by melting it with five per cent of gold and a little sulphur. Plain polished cups are sometimes made of a mixture of half gold, half brass, which is said never to tarnish and has a beautiful colour.

Status and Characteristics of Silversmiths.—The occupation of silversmith is not hereditary in Burma, though it often happens that amongst the members of a particular family one or two are found in each generation to have an especial aptitude for the work. Like other men, some work steadily and some fitfully, but a good craftsman is honoured by his fellow-townsmen and his success is felt to reflect credit on the town. Government has hitherto refrained from setting up a School of Art, having been advised to encourage individualism and the

competition of one master against another, and, as far as possible, to distribute the patronage which comes in its way amongst the best master-silversmiths in the different towns. Some of the municipalities take an interest in their handicraftsmen and help them to exhibit at the yearly Provincial Art Competitions. There remains yet the regulation of apprentices or pupils—the masters complain that a boy deserts his teacher before he has learnt his trade and undersells him with inferior work which is bought by dealers and sold to globe-trotters. It is probable that this difficulty will be surmounted by binding selected apprentices to the best masters and paying a part of their salary out of funds devoted to technical education.

The Burman silversmith has been greatly influenced by work from other countries. The Burmese Government transported whole families of artizans after the successful invasion of Siam in 1760 and the Burmese silver work gained very greatly. From about 1870 to 1885 it deteriorated very much in response to a European demand for richly embossed work in which all the leading principles of design were lost sight of in a confused jumble of inferior imitations of Italian carving. Examples of this style have been carefully excluded from this monograph, which is intended chiefly as a text-book for the silversmiths themselves. It is hoped that the connoisseur reader will remember this when reading the descriptions of the plates which follow and will not resent the didactic tone of the criticism with which he may sometimes disagree.

Description of the Plates.—The first four plates are from photographs of old bowls collected at the time of the Indian and Colonial Exhibition, and were originally taken for the instruction of modern silversmiths. The most ancient are Nos. 1 and 2 in Plate 31, which, from the style of work, are judged to date from the eighteenth century and are in low relief, but have been carried to a degree of finish requiring firing twice. Bowls Nos. 3, 4 and 5 in the same plate are supposed to have been made in the beginning of the nineteenth century and are in higher relief, but are very rough, having been fired but once; the designs are effective and well worth the consideration of modern silversmiths. Nos. 6 and 7 are of about the same date, and probably represent the best work of the period, for they are of the design used at the ceremony of washing the head of the sovereign and are ornamented with the twelve signs of the zodiac.

All the bowls shown on Plate 30 are put down to the end of the first half of the nineteenth century, say between 1840 and 1850, but No. 5, judging from the greater elaboration in the design and the tendency to confusion, accompanied by more exact workmanship, is probably the most modern. In bowl No. 1, the upper main wreath or scroll is of twisted vine tendrils sparsely leaved, treated in the Siamese manner, while the ornament at the base is of conventional lotus leaves divided as in Shan work. In all the bowls in this plate, except in No. 4, single figures are placed in "houses" formed by cusped arches of plain polished silver in high relief with a pendant below the truncated pillar of the arch, while in the spandril is shown a plain, bold spray of foliage. In No. 3 the just limit of elaboration is reached which in No. 5 is so developed that the leading lines are almost lost. Even where the foliage work is Shan, all the figures in this plate are in Burmese style. In No. 2 the upper scroll is of Burmese work, and is mean and uninteresting. The base is ornamented with a lotus leaf in the Burmese manner from which spring leaves of "foreign" design; this is the earliest known instance of European influence. The upper scroll of No. 3 is a mixture of Siamese and Shan foliage, and the attempt of a modern master silversmith to reproduce this exquisite design is shown in the lowest figure of Plate 34. The upper wreath of the fourth bowl in Plate 30 is an example of Burmese foliage in which figures of animals are introduced, the base showing the lotus treated in European style. This is the earliest known example of a bowl on which a "Zat" or story is depicted, and the artist has abolished the panels or "houses" and has arranged his figures on a frieze. The story is that of the Emperor Paw Ye Thada, who, in order to satisfy his craving for human flesh, sent out gangs of men to seize travellers and bring false charges against them, on which they were thrown into prison and executed, their bodies being taken to the Palace. His people rose and deposed him. Bowl No. 5 is entirely of Burmese design, and No. 6, with the exception of the figures, is all Shan work.

In Plate 32 is shown a most excellent Shan bowl with Burmese figures. The design is simple and effective and the subdivision of the surface is in just proportion; the polished lines are in the right places and the degree of relief is regulated according to the importance of each several part. Burmese master silversmiths should study this bowl very carefully so as to understand the principles which guided the artist who made it, and if they have not quite made up their minds let them compare it with the bowl shown on Plate 33, which is badly designed and carelessly made on a single firing.

The work shown in the first four plates was all executed with brass tools and at a time when no great store was set on highly finished execution. With the steel tools now in use it has become possible to give sharp work in high relief and at the same time to meet the demand for exactness. Plate 34 shows an adaptation of old designs by Maung Shwe Yon of Rangoon in 1885, or thereabouts. Maung Shwe Yon also designed and made

the pierced bowl given in Plate 35, which is the best example of this kind of work ever produced. The foliage is a combination of three kinds of flower work known as *tazin ngwe, kalla ban* and *kyu det*, and the skill with which the different styles have been combined to prevent monotony in the general effect is greatly appreciated by Burmese silversmiths. Round the base of the bowl is an arrangement of the leaves of the water cabbage (*hmaw*). Maung Shwe Yon died in 1889, shortly after he had finished a splendid trophy for the Mess of the Royal Engineers at Chatham.

Another great artist was Maung Myat San, and a small bowl by him is contrasted on Plate 36 with the work of a present day prizeman. The illustration does not do justice to the modern bowl, because much of the detail is lost in glitter, but after making all allowances, it cannot compare with work of the old master, which for clearness and charm of design, accuracy of workmanship and restraint, has not yet been beaten. This bowl was probably made about the year 1860.

It is interesting to compare the larger Shan betel-box cover shown in Plate 37, which is thought to date from the eighteenth century, with the Burmese work of the same period (Plate 31, figs. 1 and 2). The value of plain polished dividing lines is seen in both, but in the Shan work they are in higher relief, while in all other respects the Burmese work is better. The smaller Shan betel-box in Plate 37 shows a greater advance in design, while that in Plate 38, which is supposed to have been made about the year 1850, is better still. The silver pipe with an ivory stem in Plate 37 is a quaint piece of work in which the ornamentation of twisted wire and small beads is very effective; this pipe and the dagger above probably belonged to a *Sawbwa* or Shan prince; the lotus bud at the end of the handle of the dagger is in excellent taste.

The buckle in Plate 38 is given to show how a good Burmese silversmith can adapt an old design to modern needs. Shan silverwork is brought to Burma by pedlars and can be purchased without difficulty at the rate of twenty rupees for fourteen tolas weight, but it can sometimes be obtained for its own weight in rupees. In Plate 39 is shown a bowl made about the year 1884 by Maung Ba, now deceased. It is a modern example of a bowl without "houses," of which the earliest known is that numbered 4 in Plate 30. The upper scroll in this bowl is a combination of *kyu* and *tazin ngwe* foliage which is twisted over. The ornamentation of the base is composed of *kalla ban* set within a skeleton of lotus arranged after the Shan custom. The story is that of Wethandiya, one of the ten holy legends of Gaudama in a previous existence, and the prince is represented as making an offering of the white elephant of the kingdom to the Brahmins of the palace who, it will be noticed, wear a peculiar head dress. For this act of generosity Wethandiya is banished by his father and may be seen setting off in his chariot with his wife and two children. It would take too long to recount the further pathetic adventures of the family, but the story is beautiful and is the favourite of all in Burma.

The sugar basin shown in Plate 40 was made by Maung Pauk Tun, since deceased, and is a good example of modern work in very high relief. The bowl in the same plate is placed in the middle of the last century and was made in Arakan, probably for a Musalman, being without figures. The borders are of Shan flower work with leaves after the Siamese fashion. This interesting little piece of work was rescued from the melting pot.

The bowl shown in Plate 41 is by Maung Yin Maung, who has taken the first prize two years running at the Handicraft Competition held at Rangoon. The figure work is very good and the foliage skilfully designed and well executed. The bowl was made in 1900 and the artist has much improved in designing since then. The scene represents a king in consultation with his ministers.

In Plate 42 is given the representation of a *Swun ok* made by Maung Po Thet in 1885 or thereabouts. It is in the shape of the pagoda-shaped bowls used by the king when he offered rice at a pagoda, and is an excellent piece of work, though not of the most graceful shape.

The Pagoda Trophy presented for Association football by the Burma Athletic Association is given in Plate 43, and is carefully finished, though not a good model of the Sulè Pagoda which it is supposed to represent. Burmans are rather fond of models of pagodas in gold or silver.

Plate 44 shows the statuette of a *belu*, or ogre, with which Maung Yin Maung of Pegu won the prize for work in the round, at the Handicraft Competition of 1900. It is of brass, but is made by the *cire perdue* process by a silversmith, and is remarkable for the pose and action. Burmese connoisseurs object to this *belu* wearing flowers in his ears; his accoutrements also are of Siamese fashion, which is incorrect in a Palace ogre.

In the last plate the pupils of a silversmith are shown at work, the figures at the extreme right and left being in usual attitudes.

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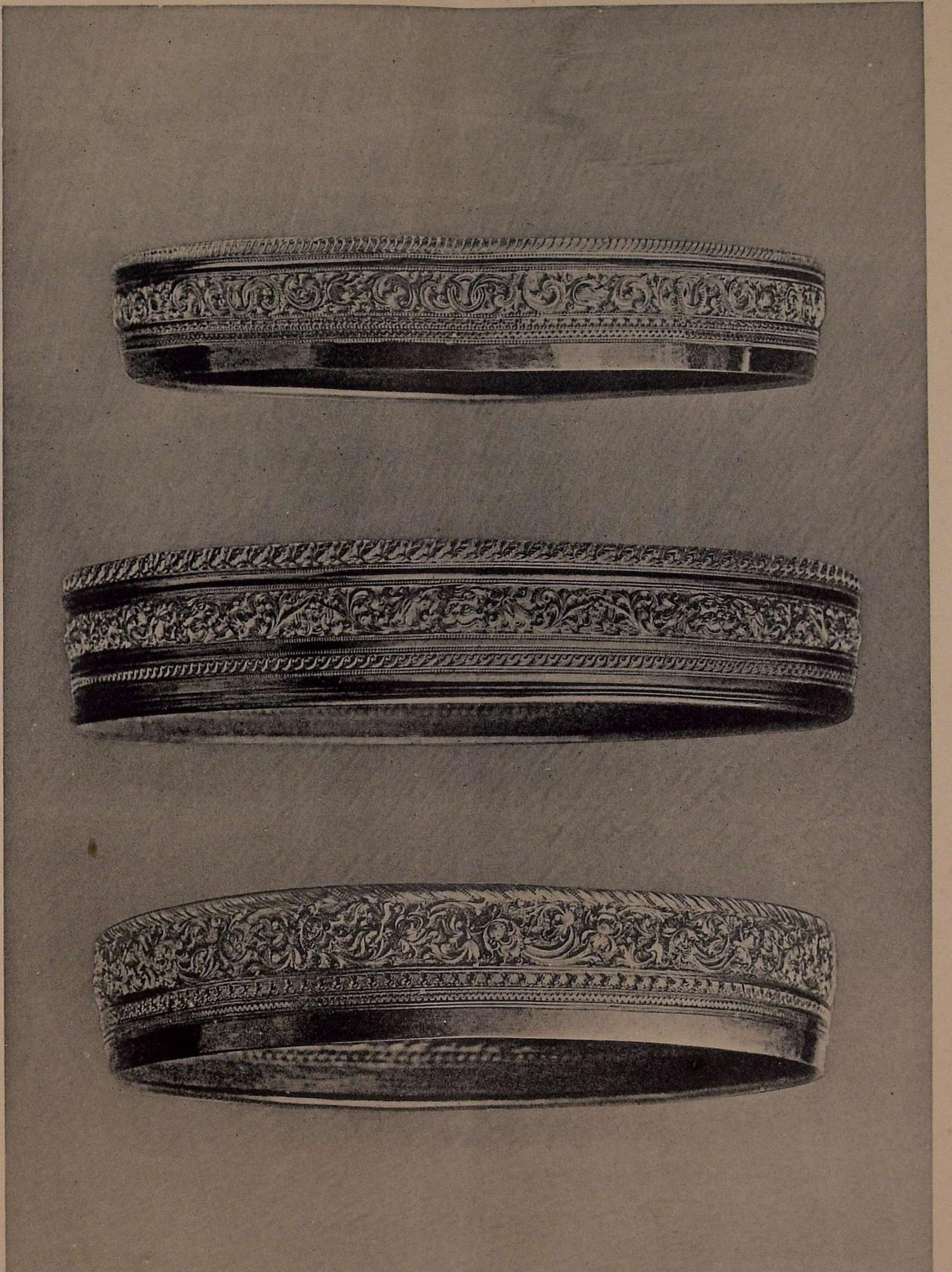
30. Burmese Silverwork—Old Bowls.

31. Burmese Silverwork—Old Bowls.

32. BURMESE SILVERWORK.

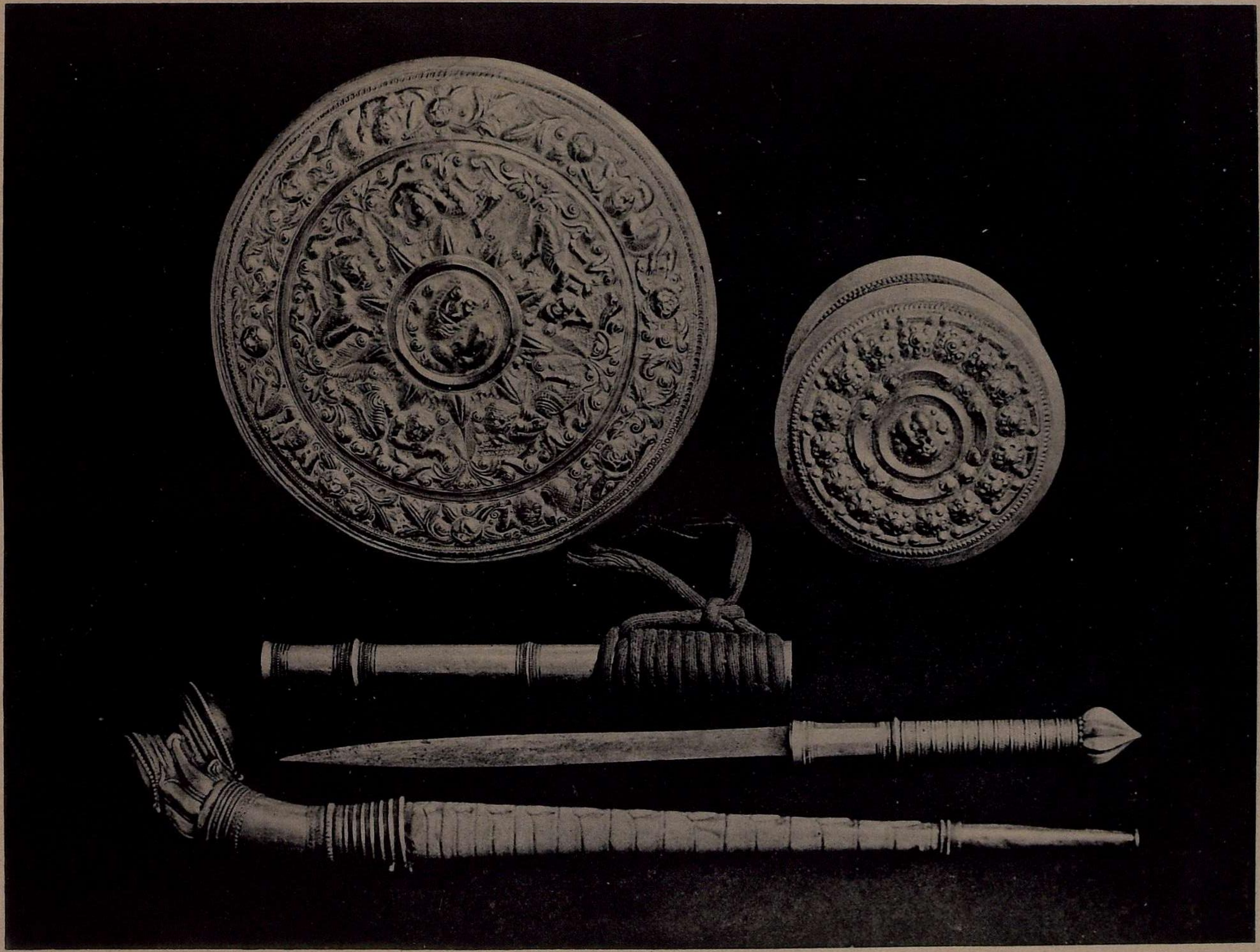
33. Burmese Silverwork.



34. Burmese Silverwork.

35. Burmese Silverwork.

36. Burmese Silverwork—Modern and Old Bowls.



37. Burmese Silverwork.

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39. BURMESE SILVERWORK.

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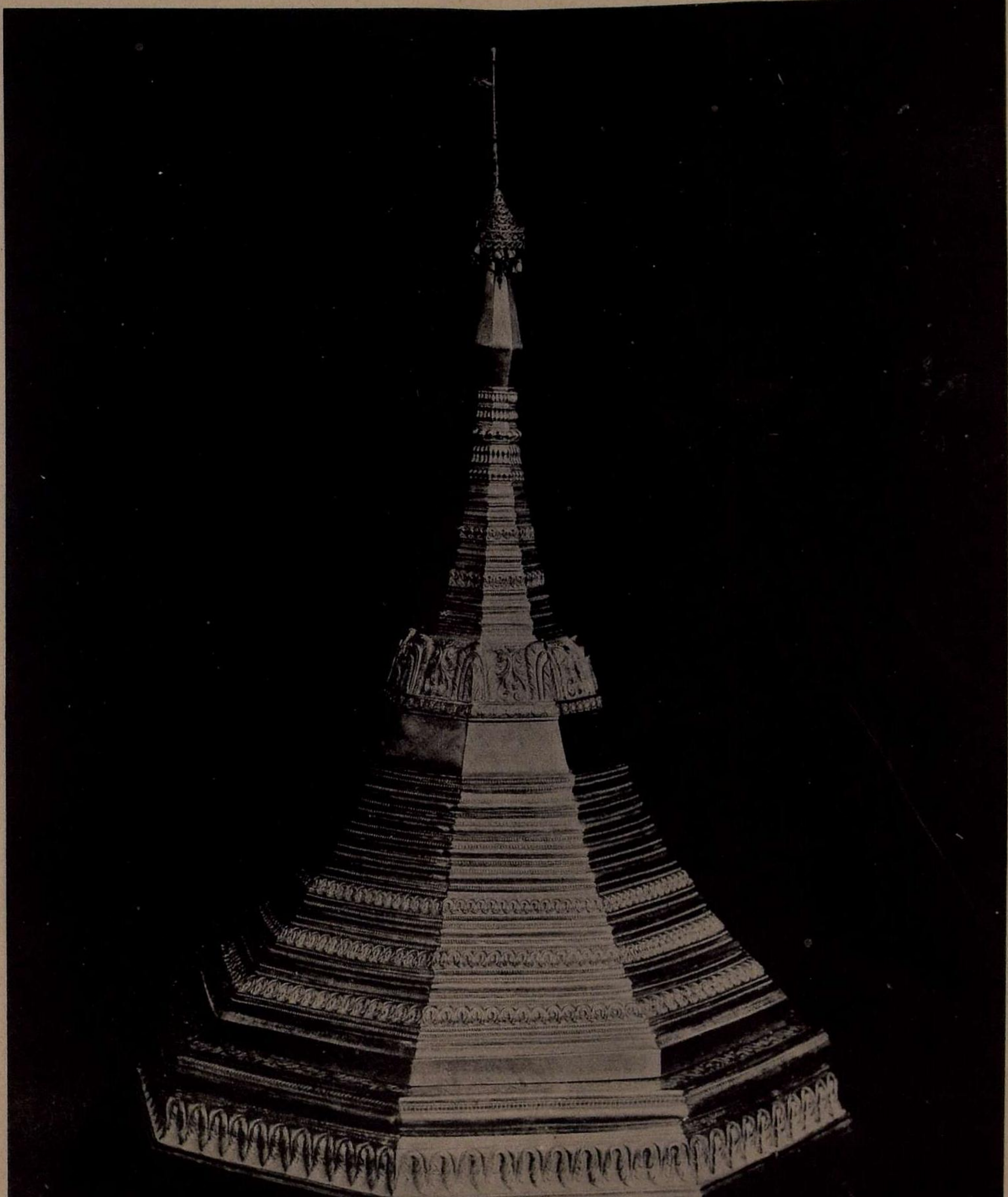
42. Burmese Silverwork.



43. Burmese Silverwork.

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TO

VOLUME VIII.

JOURNAL OF INDIAN ART

AND

INDUSTRY.

IVIE HAMILTON.

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EXTRACTS FROM PRESS NOTICES.

"One of the most sumptuous specimens of colour printing ever produced is the *Journal of Indian Art and Industry* (Messrs. W. Griggs and Sons, Peckham, S.E.). It consists of facsimiles of some of the most valuable volumes in the Royal Library at Windsor Castle. Among them is the Koran. Each is reproduced with its artistic eccentricities, and the whole forms a volume of rare beauty and interest."—*Echo*, London, 4 Sept., 1893.

"The latest issue of the *Journal of Indian Art and Industry* (W. Griggs, Elm House, Hanover Street, Peckham, London) is devoted to Persian and Indian Bookbindings. The explanatory paper is written by Surgeon Lieut.-Colonel Thomas Holbein Hendley, C.I.E., who says the best specimens of bookbinding that are now made in India come from Ulwar, and are doubtless of Persian origin. There are thirteen page-plates of bindings produced with all the care for which Mr. Griggs has established his reputation. Seven of these are from "The Royal and Historical Bindings from the Royal Library, Windsor Castle"; three are from "Memorials of the Jeypore Exhibition"; and three from "Ulwar and its Art Treasures"—*English Mail.*

"Lovers of artistic bookbinding, and, indeed, art amateurs generally, have just had brought within their reach some superb illustrations of the handiwork of Persian and Indian craftsmen. No. 43 of the remarkably cheap and sumptuously-printed *Journal of Indian Art and Industry* contains no less than 13 large quarto-sized chromo-lithographic reproductions of binding and illuminations of the best Persian and Indian periods, the originals of these superb illustrations being among the most cherished examples of the Royal Library, Windsor Castle, the Jeypore Museum, and the Ulwar Art Treasures. The taste of the Persian and Indian craftsman in colour and design seems still quite unapproachable; the examples before us seem to point to ages of evolution and progressive culture to account for their consummate beauty and simplicity. Such examples of what the older civilisations have to give us should be in every art school in the kingdom. The work is printed in a luxurious style by Mr. W. Griggs, Elm House, Hanover Street, Peckham, and published under the patronage of the Indian Government. The present part is priced 2/–, an unaccountably low figure for such a repository of Oriental classicism. Had we a Grolier Club in London such work as this would create a passion among book-buyers and reform the present fashion of casing our books."—*Bayswater Chronicle*, 26 Aug., 1893.

LONDON:

W. GRIGGS & SONS. Ld., Elm House, Hanover Street, Peckham, S.E.